

News Analysis

New Soviet Crisis Seen Over U.S. Missile Plan

First in a Series

By Victor Zorza
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Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara's announcement that the United States is to build an ABM system to protect itself against China threatens to precipitate a major crisis in the Kremlin, of the kind that led to the fall of Khrushchev in 1964.

Many Soviet leaders will insist, in spite of McNamara's strenuous effort to reassure them, that the American ABM system is designed to neutralize not only Chinese but also Soviet missiles. They will therefore use the American announcement as ammunition in their struggle, which has grown increasingly intense in recent months, to get a much bigger slice of the nation's resources for a major rearmament program.

In this struggle Brezhnev, the party secretary, stands

by and large on the military platform, and Premier Kosygin on the civilian.

Evidence gleaned between the lines of the Soviet press shows that Kosygin's position has already been dangerously undermined by the military political lobby. It is now in danger of collapsing altogether.

The Kremlin policy struggle is not a straight-forward contest between civilians and military. Nor is it a stark confrontation between those who simply want more money for defense, and those who prefer to have more consumer goods. Within this rough and ready outline, it is possible to discern contradictory trends and cross-currents, the most important of which concerns the Soviet ABM program.

Whether the Soviet Union
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is to build a full-fledged ABM system has been a major political issue in the Kremlin for many years. There is no reason to assume that the ABM installations around Moscow represent an advanced system. There is even less reason to make any such assumption about Soviet installations elsewhere—near Leningrad and Tallin, east of the Urals, or in South Russia.

Efficacy Questioned

The latest outburst of the Soviet ABM debate became evident in February, when some of Russia's highest military authorities took mutually contradictory positions in public on the efficacy of the Soviet system. Some of the statements, made on Armed Forces Day, could be read as saying that the Soviet ABM system was capable of providing reliable defenses — while others seemed designed to suggest that it provided no such thing.

The controversy was still at full tilt earlier this month when Marshal Krylov, the commander-in-chief of the strategic missile forces, listed publicly the factors which "ensure that rockets are virtually invulnerable, especially when used en masse."

For Krylov to say that missiles are "virtually invulnerable" is to deny any validity to the argument in favor of a Soviet ABM. For him to argue that large numbers make them even less vulnerable is to say that he wants more missiles, not more ABMs. This is much the same as McNamara's own arguments against those who want an anti-Soviet ABM.

The contrary view has been expressed most recently by Marshal Chuikov, the head of civil defense, who listed "our ABM" as being among "the best means of defending our country against a nuclear attack." It was their task to ensure, he said, that hostile missiles "will be destroyed even before they approach Soviet borders."

The inconclusive nature of the Soviet policy debate and the shifting alignments

within even the military leadership, are best shown by the fact that during the February outburst Marshal Chuikov was still among those who tended to cast doubt on the effectiveness on an ABM.

Pressure Increases

But after February it became evident that the pressure for a Soviet ABM had greatly increased, and Marshal Chuikov's change of front is only one of a number of indications of the growing strength of the military-political lobby. The pressure found vent publicly in the military press, which had also provided similar indications, just before the fall of Khrushchev, of the gradual weakening of his position.

At that time, the military-political lobby urged the allocation of greater resources to heavy industry and to steel production which provide, even in modern times, the necessary underpinning for defense industries. The same symbols, and issues, have re-emerged in the course of the current Soviet policy debate, but this time they are linked with the demand for even greater resources needed to develop and deploy an ABM system.

Modern weapons development, said "Red Star," the army paper, had raised the role of economic factors to an "extraordinary" extent, and had faced the economy — "and particularly heavy industry" — with a number of new demands. The production of new weapons, including "anti-missile defenses, requires huge economic efforts," the newspaper said.

The military competition with the civilian sector for more money was only one element in the struggle. Kosygin was the great champion of the economic reform which would, in his view, improve Russia's economic and scientific potential so greatly as to provide the country with the necessary defense capability. Indeed, Kosygin's argument can be read as pressing for economic reform as the best way to provide the necessary military strength.

But writers in

"the Army of the Armed Forces" argued that the reform, and economic and scientific potential, did not of themselves constitute military strength. "Actual defense measures," they argued, "are also necessary." And the implication was that those who were stressing the economic aspect were neglecting the real needs of defense.

How the fortunes of the battle went could best be judged by observing the debate on steel production. Under Khrushchev, this fight led to the identification of the military-political lobby as "metal eaters" in attacks on them published in the Soviet press.

After the fall of Khrushchev the steel production target was increased, but last year the differences between Brezhnev and Kosygin on this issue were almost allowed to come out in public. At the Party congress, Brezhnev condemned (Khrushchev's) "incorrect viewpoint" that modern substitutes would reduce the need for steel, and announced that this error would now be put right in the development of the steel industry.

Brezhnev Challenged

Kosygin, on the other hand, opened his remarks on steel by assuring the Congress that the industry had "considerable achievements" to its credit, and that in some ways it had even surpassed "the most developed capitalist countries." He was, in effect, challenging Brezhnev's implied view that the country needed much more steel. By last May Brezhnev also came to praise the steel industry — but only in order to bury Kosygin. He recalled that before the last war Russia was producing 18 million tons of steel; after the war this rose to 60 million, and now it was a 100 million. "And still," he said, "this cannot satisfy us."

It evidently satisfied Kosygin, but not the military-political lobby. Although the official steel target for 1971 is 124-129 million tons, Kosygin's planners had set a target of 120 million tons. The military-political lobby had set a target of 130 million tons.

it so effectively that the party leadership was constrained to issue a public rebuke to them.

This was in the form of a joint decision by the party central committee and the Government, which declared the "accelerated development" of the steel industry to be a highly important national task. It therefore ordered the "substantial intensification" of capital construction in the steel industry to enable it to achieve the 1970 output targets.

This can only mean that Kosygin, who is in charge of the economy, had viewed the proposed massive increase from just over 100 million tons this year to nearly 130 million tons within the next three years as wrong.

If he had provided the necessary production capacity in the first place, there would have been no need last month to issue orders for a speedup. The announcement was a major defeat for Kosygin, and a victory for the military-political lobby, whose pressure on behalf of heavy industry was also a pressure for steel — and for a Soviet ABM system.

As Marshal Krylov's article showed earlier this month, the victory of the military — political lobby was confined to the steel issue — otherwise he would not have been able to publicly denigrate the effectiveness of the ABM.

But if the United States is building one, then those Soviet leaders who might have been willing to engage in talks on an ABM moratorium with the U.S. will have had the ground knocked from under them.

But might the American action provide a final incentive for the Russians, perhaps, to engage in talks with the United States, before deciding on a large-scale Soviet ABM development? It just conceivably might — but McNamara would first have to allay the misgivings which his announcement is bound to have aroused in the Kremlin.

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